

# Class War at the Capital

Prabhat Patnaik

Karl Marx, I am often told, is out of date. But the conditions of work that prevail at this very moment in industrial establishments within barely a dozen kilometers of New Delhi are reminiscent, if anything, of a period that even pre-dates what Marx was writing about. The level of regimentation is such that workers are not allowed more than five minutes during the entire working day for visiting the toilet. And this is true not just of garment workers whose employment habitats are widely recognized as being notoriously akin to sweat-shops; it is also true, as a [recent public hearing](#) revealed, even of workers in one of modern India's show-case factories, the Maruti-Suzuki plant near Gurgaon. Indeed it is a common practice among workers near India's capital to cut drastically their intake of fluids, so that they do not violate their quota of five minutes of toilet visit per working day.

Since the garment factories around Gurgaon have to sell their products to big multinationals like Gap and H&M whose public relations staff project them as having "[corporate social responsibility](#)", an impression has to be created that the conditions of work where the garments are produced, are decent. Towards this end, inspection mechanisms have been put in place to keep the multinational company's image among its customers intact. According to garment workers' testimony however, the days of inspection are known to the factory management well in advance; and on those days several temporary toilets are put up in the factories, so that inspectors go back satisfied with the facilities enjoyed by the workers. But the moment their backs are turned, the temporary toilets are promptly removed, since too many toilets are obviously not necessary if each worker is allowed a five minute visit per day.

Lest it be thought that the garment-selling multinationals are well-meaning innocents, while villainy is confined to the local factory bosses, I should clarify that the work-norms according to which the workers are paid are specified by these multinational companies to the factories to which they outsource their work. These norms are such that the workers (who are all on piece rates) are paid only eight hours' wages for a piece of work that actually takes no less than ten hours. They do not get a penny for the two hours of extra work they do to fulfill their work-norm. The fixing of the norm in other words is so rigged by the multinationals, behind the backs of their customers who might otherwise raise objections, that unpaid surplus labour is appropriated through an implicit lengthening of the working day for the same wage, exactly as Marx had highlighted.

Nassau Senior, the first Professor of Political Economy at Oxford, had objected strenuously in his time to a reduction of the working day by one hour, on the grounds that all profits were earned from that last hour's work. This claim is what had elicited Marx's derisive references to "[Senior's last hour](#)". The derision was justified: if the workers could produce value that is equivalent to the value of their wage basket in 6 hours of work in a total working day of 12 hours, then a reduction of this working day to 11 hours will reduce profits by only one-sixth; it will not eliminate profits.

Put differently, Senior's argument in the context of a 12 hour working day amounted to saying that the share of profits in value added was a mere 8 percent which is absurd since this share was perhaps more than half even in the middle of the nineteenth

century. But Senior's concern, which reflected the concern of the capitalist class of his time, to many of whose members he was personally close, though expressed through an erroneous argument, stemmed from an appreciation of the importance of the length of the working day. Marx had emphasized precisely this importance; Senior, ironically against his own will, was therefore only proving Marx right.

What is remarkable however is that notwithstanding all the technological progress that has taken place since Marx's days, all the automation that is supposed to have eliminated the need for human labour, and all the talk about the superiority of [Japanese-style benevolent employer-worker relationships](#) over the traditional Western capitalist preference for dealing with workers with a "stick", capitalists still continue to be obsessed with lengthening the working day to the maximum extent possible, to a point where even more than five minutes of toilet time for workers becomes unacceptable to them.

While all this is reminiscent of Marx's days, there is an important respect in which workers' condition here is worse than in those days; and that relates to workers' organization. Marx's days were characterized by workers' "combinations" that later grew into powerful trade unions; but the hallmark of the industrial establishments around Delhi today is the virtual absence of trade unions. This is true not only of the garment workers, as one would expect, but, surprisingly, even of workers in the modern Maruti-Suzuki factory.

In this factory too, as in the rest of the country during the period when it is supposed to have been "shining", there has been a persistent tendency to replace regular workers with contract workers; since the latter are more difficult to unionize, this undermines the prospects of unionization. Nonetheless there has been an attempt for some time now to form a union at the Maruti factory that brings together both the remaining regular workers and the contract workers. And this attempt has been fiercely resisted by the management, leading to a [prolonged conflict](#) at the factory.

This conflict reached a flashpoint when there was violence at the factory on July 18, 2012, in which a company executive was killed. How this occurred remains a mystery. While the blame was put on the agitating workers, it was stated at the public hearing that no proper investigation was held into the incident; and the executive who died was supposedly sympathetic to the workers who had no cause for anger against him. And yet his death was the occasion for 147 workers to be rounded up and charged with murder under section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. They continue to languish in jail since then, for more than a year, without any bail and without even any parole on occasions like the birth of a child or the death of a parent.

I am reminded of two deaths that had occurred in the colonial times. One was in Kayyur in the Western Ghats in Kerala, where a policeman faced by an irate mob consisting of people some of whom had been victims of excesses committed by him a few days earlier, jumped into the Kariangode river below and drowned. The other was in the princely state of Ranpur in Odisha where the British political agent was lynched by an irate mob during a praja uprising. The colonial government had unleashed massive repression in both places, but on neither occasion were a hundred-odd people charged with murder. It is a symptom of the retrogression we have made in the realm of civil liberties and democratic rights that in independent India a hundred-odd workers are charged with murder for an uninvestigated death in a factory.

The proximate reason for this retrogression is obvious. The judge, while denying bail to the accused workers, had said that granting bail would send a wrong signal to the prospective foreign investors in the country (since Maruti is now a foreign-owned company). It is not a judge's business of course to be concerned about signals to investors; but he was simply expressing what has become the dominant official obsession in the country. And if this obsession is to be nurtured, then denying rights to workers, putting as many of them in jail as possible if they dare to talk of forming a union, becomes quite naturally the order of the day.

It was mentioned at the Maruti workers' public hearing that a top executive of the company had justified its actions on the grounds that they were engaged in a "class war". He was more perceptive than most intellectuals who call Karl Marx dated. But in one sense he was wrong. What we are witnessing is not a normal "class war", but a "class war" in which the ruling classes are fast moving in the direction of fascism. I had written earlier in this column ("A Mosaic Fascism", The Telegraph, June 20) about Muslim youths in Uttar Pradesh being routinely incarcerated for years on end on the mere suspicion of being "terrorists". Workers trying to form a union being incarcerated for years fall into the same pattern.

**\* This article was originally published in The Telegraph, Calcutta, India, on September 18, 2013.**